

University of Northern Iowa  
**UNI ScholarWorks**

---

Graduate Research Papers

Student Work

---

2005

## A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Beth Lang  
*University of Northern Iowa*

Copyright ©2005 Beth Lang

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#)

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

---

### Recommended Citation

Lang, Beth, "A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay" (2005). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1050.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1050>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

---

## A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

I think that it is critical, as someone who would like to become an administrator, to have a vision and to know what critical elements I feel are essential as a future administrator. I feel that it helps us guide our decisions. It gives us a basis to fall back on when we make decisions. There are so many decisions we need to make day to day that sometimes I feel we could get lost in what is important. I think this guide can be used so that when we need to make a decision we can go back and look at what elements we feel are critical to an exemplary leader. Our decisions should not sway from those core beliefs; they should drive what we do.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

---

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

---

by

Beth Lang

May 2005

Dr. Greg Reed

This Research Paper by: Beth Lang

Entitled: Reflective Research Paper

Has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Arts in Education

3/28/05

Date Approved

Gregory A. Reed

Advisor/Director of research Paper

3-28-05

Date Approved

Victoria L. Robinson

Second Reader of research Paper

3/29/05

Date Received

John K. Smith

Head, Department of educational  
Leadership, Counseling, and  
Postsecondary Education

## Introduction

I think that it is critical, as someone who would like to become an administrator, to have a vision and to know what critical elements I feel are essential as a future administrator. I feel that it helps us guide our decisions. It gives us a basis to fall back on when we make decisions. There are so many decisions we need to make day to day that sometimes I feel we could get lost in what is important. I think this guide can be used so that when we need to make a decision we can go back and look at what elements we feel are critical to an exemplary leader. Our decisions should not sway from those core beliefs; they should drive what we do.

## Educational Philosophy

I think that developing my educational philosophy is one of the most important things I can do as an educator and an educational leader. It is what should drive everything I do. It gives me a direction and focus to the decisions I will have to make as an administrator. The philosophies I believe in are; I believe all children should be looked at as individuals, I believe teachers are the foundation of the school and should receive as much support as possible, I believe that change is a vital component of a school environment and it should be encouraged, and I believe the school is a public place where everyone should feel welcome.

The first educational philosophy I believe in is that I believe that all children should be looked at as individuals. I know the reason why I became a teacher and why I want to be an administrator is because I want to see all children succeed. With all the different children coming through the front door of our school it is difficult to meet each of their needs. They enter with different backgrounds, on different levels, and with different needs. I believe that it is imperative

that we look at each child as an individual and help them grow from where they come to us. They may not all fit into a typical first grade or fifth grade classroom but what is important is that we help them feel successful no matter what their needs or strengths are. As teachers and administrators we can not just teach to a typical classroom anymore. Children learn in different ways. There is so much research to support the different learning styles of children that we need to teach things in a variety of ways. We also need to begin teaching the child from where they come to us. In order to do this we need to really get to know each child and understand them. This takes a lot of time but I believe it is the most important thing we can do as a teacher and an administrator.

Another personal philosophy I have is that I believe that teachers are the foundation of the school and should receive as much support as possible. In order to meet the varying needs of the students in our school, teachers need to have all the support they can get. It is a stressful and difficult job, teaching children. If there is a support system of personnel in a school that can be utilized to help teachers in their rooms it needs to be done. Another support system that should be considered is the support of parents. If parents are able and willing to come into the classroom, or help in other ways, it should be encouraged. This not only helps support the teacher but also develops a strong communication between the teachers and the parents. Teachers also need to receive in-service or instruction on the latest research so that they can help each child succeed. This is hard to do when the teacher is typically in their classroom behind closed doors for most of the year. There needs to be a time for teachers to receive this in-service and time for them to collaborate with other educators. The more opportunities the teachers have to collaborate the more successful and supported they will feel. I believe this is imperative to the

growth of the teacher and the school. If the teachers feel validated and supported, that feeling will carry over to many aspects of the school environment.

I also believe that change is a vital component of a school environment and it should be encouraged. I think that it is important for schools to be changing in order to keep up with the trend of education. There is always new research and data that helps us as educators understand how to meet the individual needs of children. It is important that we learn and grow as educators. Change is inevitable in an educational setting. I believe that if a school is stagnate it will eventually fail. Educators need to accept this reality and be ready to embrace it. It is hard to do sometimes. We get so use to doing things a certain way and then new research comes along and we have to change again. Many times the pendulum swings back to a way that has already been tried. This, at times, is hard to accept because we may feel that we have already moved past that point. Change needs to be something that all educators accept. If we look at it as a positive reality and that the change will help us to better educate the students, then the acceptance should be easier. I don't think anyone in education can say that they know it all. The ones who are willing to change and grow are the ones who will help children succeed and I feel will be more fulfilled in their job as an educator.

I believe that a school is a public place where everyone should feel welcome. This includes students, parents and the community. The school building belongs to the community. I believe that if the school is a place where everyone feels welcome and accepted then people will talk positively about it. This is especially true for students. They need to feel like the climate of the school is one where they feel welcome and accepted. When students feel this they will want to come to school each day and learn. Parents should also feel like they can come into the

building and feel welcome. They should feel like it is a place where their questions and comments are accepted. I think that this welcome atmosphere will help give the school a positive name in the community. I think that it is very important for schools to develop this reputation. A school is a critical part of the community and the community should feel pride when it comes to their schools. Developing a warm and welcome climate where everyone is accepted will help create this kind of atmosphere.

I think that these beliefs, at this point in my life, make up my educational philosophy. I know that as time goes on these philosophies may change and grow as I do as an educator. I know that at this time they are the foundation of which I am and help drive the decisions and choices I make.

#### Critical Elements:

There are four critical elements I think are essential for exemplary educational leadership. The four elements are, a sense of humor, communication, credibility, and being able to use data and assessments to make change. I feel that these elements are essential to have in order to be a successful educational leader.

I think one of the exemplary leadership skills that is critical to any successful leader is a sense of humor. A sense of humor is a management skill that is often overlooked. I think with the added stress that is occurring in education it is a skill that should not be overlooked and should, in fact, be part of a job requirement. In addition to helping employees cope with change, humor is the only management tool you'll ever find that will do the following: Strengthen bonds between co-workers, create rapport with customers, get and hold attention, strengthen memory of



the points you want to be remembered, persuade others to see (and perhaps adopt) your point of view, make communication less awkward, deflect criticism, reduce tension, frustration and anger, manage conflicts, reduce burnout, remove intimidating barriers between management and non-management employees, and it helps keep everyday hassles and problems in perspective. Many companies are looking into humor as a prerequisite to hiring. In recent years Hewlett-Packard managers have been evaluated on their ability to create enthusiasm among employees. Building fun and humor into the corporate culture insures that this enthusiasm exists. I believe that in education we need to begin to look at how humor can be used to reduce teacher and administrators stress. It is worth looking into, as the educational system is becoming more and more stressful with the growing demands that are put on teachers.

It is not surprising to learn that American businesses spend more than \$300 billion on stress-related health care costs, workers compensation and absenteeism. Inappropriate competition within the work place is taking an incredible toll on morale and productivity. Work has become a race for our lives, instead of a place to find some enjoyment and camaraderie. Many major corporations (IBM to Wendy's, Ben and Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream and Southwest Airlines) are taking action to put positive humor back in the workplace. When administrators allow and encourage employees to be more humorous and creative in the workplace, stress-related health care costs can be reduced-"Laughter is the Best Medicine". Humor does belong in the workplace. It can be used in staff meetings to relieve stress. By conducting staff meetings with fun activities and cooperative games you can get your point across in a lasting way! It can be used with the children in the classrooms. It can be used in the staff lounge during lunch. It can help teachers deal with change and all of the stress that occurs

daily in a school environment. Instead of the staff lounge becoming a place where people complain it could be a fun place to go and unwind. I believe the number of days the staff would be absent and the health related issues, would decrease if the school environment were a fun place where people want to go.

I think it is important to talk about the dos and don'ts when it comes to humor in the workplace. Humor should be appropriate for the workplace setting and never be at the expense of others. I believe there are some common practices that need to be done in order to make sure humor is appropriate for work. One important point you need to do is to check the "pulse" at work. You need to make sure it fits the environment. Another important element is the ability to laugh at yourself. If you can laugh at yourself you can put others at ease and you won't risk offending anyone. Make sure our comments are light so it doesn't appear to be a cry for help. There should be no sarcasm in the humor. I believe this is rarely a good idea in the work place. Sarcasm is usually at the expense of others. I think you also need to be able to read people. It is important to realize who accepts the humor and who doesn't.

When used appropriately humor can be a wonderful tool that can be used as an administrator. I can personally recall the administrators who have made the greatest impact on the schools I have worked in and they are the ones who brought humor to our school. They made the task at hand, enjoyable but we also knew we had a job to do. When those elements can be in place it is successful.

Another one of the critical elements I think is essential for exemplary leadership is the ability to analyze, reflect, and set goals based upon the student assessment data. Once those goals are set it is also critical that the principal keep the momentum moving toward the achievement of

those goals. These goals are important because they should drive most of the decisions in the school. The staff development decisions as well as the instructional methods that are used by the teachers should all revolve around them. The principal is the one who should lead the staff and the school community through the process of improving student achievement. The principal should also be responsible for providing the necessary materials, as well as, an avenue through which teachers can achieve knowledge, in order for the goals to be achieved.

One of the first steps in the process is to analyze the schools data. I feel that it is important that the principal involve the entire staff in this process. I think this is critical because it gives the staff an opportunity to voice their opinions, as well, as feel that they are a critical and important part in the implementation. If the staff and community have a part in some of the decision-making they will have more "buy in" when it comes to the implementation of the goals (*Leading Your School: A Principal's Role*, 2004). As the principal we need to make sure that the data is understood and that the goals and the direction of the building are based on the analysis of that data.

It is important to work with the staff through this process. Instead of enforcing policies that are made elsewhere we need to work collegially with the staff, sharing authority with them. The ideas and analysis of the data should come from those who work directly with the students. They are the ones who are the most informed and have the credible opinions about what educational arrangements would be the most beneficial to their students (Cotton, Kathleen, 2004).

The next step in the process is to reflect and clarify the problem areas and to set goals in order to improve in those areas of need. It is essential that we help lead the discussions about what the priorities really are in the school. They need to be able to look at the strengths and

weaknesses of the data and set goals that can focus on one or two of those priorities (*Leading Your School: A Principal's Role*, 2004). We need to be able to motivate the staff to try something different so that change can take place. That is why it is critical for the staff to be part of the decision-making process from the very beginning. Once they have set the priorities we should guide the staff into the goal setting process. Along with the goals, decisions need to be made regarding the assessments that are going to be used along the way. Teachers should feel very comfortable with the assessments chosen because they are critical in the tracking of the goals (*Leading Your School: A Principal's Role*, 2004). The principal needs to be able to take the goals that are set and model their importance. The staff will pay close attention to what the principal attends to. The staff development given, as well as, the recognition and talk used by us should all revolve around the progression of the goals. We should communicate progress towards those goals in newsletters and other correspondence to staff and the school community (*Leading Your School: A Principal's Role*, 2004). This careful attention to the goals will also help the principal monitor them to see if changes or revisions need to be made.

Once the goals have been set and teachers are comfortable with the understanding of them, and the assessments used for tracking, We need to be the one to keep the momentum moving toward their achievement. I think this is a critical part of the process. We, as administrators, need to be the change agent in the school. This is a careful balance between making sure change is taking place and still showing a level of care and consideration toward the teachers as they are making the change in their teaching styles (Fitzhugh-Walker, Paulette. Jeffries, T. Phildra., Thomas, Cornell., 2000). The principal, many times, is caught between the need for change and all that is mandated by the district, community and school board, and the

need to please the teachers and students through the process. The principal is the one who is often placed in the role as a mediator. Change will not occur if it is either a top-down or bottom-up process. It is when both are used and begin to interact that change will occur. In the book What's Worth fighting for in Your School (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992) they looked at three things that need to be in place for a school to have success through the change process. They are the existence of a professional learning community, review and refinement of instructional practices, and evaluation of student progress. The professional communities constantly examine student work and achievement and revise their teaching styles accordingly. The role of the principal then, is to foster these professional communities. The balancing act comes with the need to integrate the bottom-up with the top-down in a way to make everyone happy. It is a difficult task but, one that is very exciting because there is an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the students, teachers and parents.

I believe the critical element of interpreting student data and setting goals to approve student achievement is critical as schools move closer to gaining control of student performance. As the schools gain this control, the more likely the school is to exhibit qualities that have been found to promote effectiveness. That is why I believe this is a critical element for exemplary leadership.

Another essential element that is critical to an exemplary leader is the ability to communicate. The word communicate refers to not only the words used to transfer information to others, but also how those words are received by the receiver. This type of communication can also be described as creating understanding. Through words, actions, body language, voice tone, and other processes you send many messages about yourself, the changes, and your organization

(Osborn, Michael, 2004). Communicating with words is one half of the communication process. The other half consists of verifying that the message you intended to send was actually received and interpreted the way you intended it to be. The only way you can do that is by listening to the people you have communicated with, and by making a special effort to encourage them to reflect back what they have heard from you. Some important things to remember is that even though the communication may seem clear to you, the receiver of the information filters the information through a set of pre-conceptions, that can distort the message. The other concern is that receivers listen selectively. They hear and process some things and block out others. That means that while you have explained the "whole picture" it is likely that the "whole picture" wasn't received (Osborn, Michael, 2004). The only way that you can ensure that you have created common understanding is by asking the other people what they have heard, and what their reactions are to the message.

One of the most important messages we will send as an administrator is that of a change in the system. It is important to understand that when we communicate about a change we know what kind of message we want to send. It is important that we send the message that we are personally committed to the change, and that we will see it through until the end. We also need to be aware that change may have a negative impact upon some people. We may need to open the discussion about the feelings of the employees regarding the change. We need to show that we are confident that the school and the employees can make it through the changes and that we want input to make the changes work. Even if the change may be hard on some it is still important to stay positive and communicate the change in a confident manner.

As an administrator, or a change leader, we need to make decisions about whom to

communicate with, what needs to be communicated, when it will be communicated, and how we will do it. Some of the time the administrator communicates change only to the people who needs to know. However, effective change leaders recognize that almost any change will have effects on most people in an organization. The basic rule of thumb is that communication should take place directly between the leader and the employees when employees need to know or want to know about the change (Osborn, Michael, 2004). As an administrator we would be better off over-including people in our communication, than leaving people out.

When we determine what to communicate we need to keep in mind what we are trying to accomplish. We need to give information that will reduce uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the change. There needs to be a forum for employees to communicate their reactions and concerns. We should communicate as much information about the change that is available to us. There may need to be some judgement if there is confidentiality involved. We need to also be aware that we are communicating not only the facts about the change but our reactions to it. The staff will watch to try to determine our feelings about the changes and draw their own conclusions based on our behavior.

Communication should be done as quickly as possible. This is because it is very difficult to "keep a lid" on anything (Zust, Christine, 2004). Things are usually heard through the grapevine even if nothing has been said by the administrator. Grapevine information tends to be sketchy, enough that it usually creates a high degree of anxiety. So, the earlier we communicate the less likely the information will come through the grapevine. The communication should occur in anticipation of change, during the change, and after the change has been stabilized (Zust, Christine, 2004).

Another decision that needs to be addressed is how to communicate the information. It can be done in a variety of ways. It could be through a group or single meeting. Communicating in groups has some advantages and disadvantages. Group communication ensures that everyone is hearing the same information. It also allows for people to interact with each other about the change and it develops a sense of a team. The disadvantage is that they may not feel comfortable talking in groups. A second danger is that one or two particularly vocal and negative people can set the tone for the group. Finally there are some issues that can not be discussed within a group. If it is likely to upset individuals it should be done in private.

Most communication, when it comes to change, should be done orally. There is a tendency for some administrators to avoid unpleasant interactions and they may choose written interactions to avoid the discomfort. Written communication may be appropriate if it is needed for a record of the communication for future reference, or if it may be needed to refer to at a later date. Generally it may be wise to use both written and oral communication.

As an administrator, communication is our primary and most important tool. There is no substitute for good judgement. We need to be reflective and thoughtful about the ways we communicate. There is also no substitute for listening and receiving feedback from the staff and colleagues about how we communicate. We will all make mistakes but being corrective and active in nature is a sign of an effective administrator.

Another essential element that is needed for an effective administrator is credibility. The elements I have discussed above are all very important to an effective leader but leadership is much more personal than that; credibility matters and provides the foundation of personal leadership. Credibility refers to the quality of being believable, dependable, and worthy of



people's trust and confidence when we lead we need to influence people. We want to have an effect on another person's attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors. The ability to influence can not happen without the relationship between people. According to a study the most important thing people look for in a leader is trustworthiness. They want people to inspire them by communicating in ways that encourage them to perform to their potential. People want to follow a person who can get the job done and who demonstrates the ability to lead. Almost everyone in the study felt they could distinguish between someone who was credible and who wasn't. A credible leader is someone they perceived as effective. They were more willing to follow a leader that was credible than one they felt wasn't credible.

As an effective administrator how do we earn this credibility? A credible leader is someone who acts with character and integrity. As a leader, we need to know what our values are and then make sure our actions align with those core values. When we do this we will gain credibility with our staff. They will see the consistency in our actions. Another way to gain credibility is to build the trust among our colleagues. When we say we are going to do something we need to make sure we do it. The staff needs to know that their administrator represents them with integrity. Administrators enhance their credibility when they begin to distribute leadership throughout the organization. They build peoples confidence and it allows them to have some say in the leadership of the building. If an administrator is credible the staff will want to do what is right to help the organization. When that happens an administrator will know they are credible. Many organizations loose faith in their administration. Especially in today's society and with the recent headlines about the lack of credible leaders in an organization, people are not as confident about their administrators as before. Credibility isn't the result of a position or title. It isn't

gained in a workshop. It is a lifestyle. It isn't a single event that will prove it. There are no shortcuts. It is only earned over time. It can also be lost in a moment with a careless word, or an inappropriate action. Because it takes time to build and can be easily lost, we need to make sure we take it seriously.

There are many ways we can earn credibility but here are a few things we need to remember as administrators. We need to lead by listening. A good listener doesn't merely hear what is being said but rather observes and reflects on the whole picture. When we do this, as an administrator, we are viewed as caring and it gives the staff the perception that they matter and their opinions are valued. We also need to align our verbal and nonverbal language. Credibility is enhanced by consistent verbal and nonverbal language. The key word is consistent.

Administrators who overlook nonverbal language are dismissing one of the most powerful tools. If our body language is not aligned with our verbal language then the message may be confusing and therefore our credibility will be low. Another way to boost our credibility is to make realistic promises and to keep them. Credibility can fizzle if we don't keep our word. We need to live up to the promises we have made. If we have a habit of committing more than we can deliver, then we need to think before we speak. We need to make sure our promises are just that, a promise we can keep. Another thing to remember is to speak from the heart. When a message is communicated from the heart, it is more believable. We need to also remember to be ourselves. We need to make sure that we don't misrepresent ourselves as someone else. People can see through individuals who try to be someone they aren't. Most people can see the "real thing" in a person. We also need to try to be the expert. It is not wise to have a superficial knowledge base with no depth. A credible leader will be one who will share the knowledge they have and find

out what they still need to know. The last two tips to remember are to be honest and to be proactive. To be proactive would be to find out ahead of time what needs to be done in order to stay credible. These things will help us stay credible.

I think credibility is one of the most powerful and valuable tools you can have because it goes to the core of who you are as a person and a leader. It is something that needs to be built upon and maintained for life.

#### Conclusions:

In conclusion, these critical elements are what should drive what we do as an administrator. They are the elements I feel are essential to an exemplary leader. They should be referred to whenever I make tough decisions.

I should feel good about what I do and know that I have made the best decisions I possibly can. I should also know that these core beliefs drove my decisions and I did the best I could.

## References:

- Atkinson, J. (1993). The Basic Skills Needed at Work: A Companion Report to Basic Skills and Jobs. London, England: Institute of Manpower Studies. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED362706.
- Blumefield, Ester. Humor at Work. Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1994.
- Carnevale, A.P. (1990). *Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employees Want*. ASTD Best Practice Series: Training for the Changing Workplace. Jossey-Bass Management Series.
- Cotton, Kathleen. (2004). *School-Based Management*. Retrieved May 1, 2004 from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/7/topsyn6.html>.
- Feigelson, Sheila. Energize Your Meetings With Laughter. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.
- Fitzhugh-Walker, Paulette, Jeffries, T. Philidra., Thomas, Cornell., (2000). We Can Have Better Urban School. (pp.19-20), San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press.
- Fullan, Michael, Hargreaves, Andy., (1992). What's Worth Fighting For In Your School. Toronto: Teachers College Press.
- Goodman, Joel. Laffermations: 1001 Ways to Add Humor to Your Life and Work. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc. 1995.
- Kowalski, T.J. (1991). Perceptions of Desired Skills for Effective Principals. *Journal of School Leadership*, 2, 299-309.
- Morris, Greg. (2004). Credibility: The Acid Test of Leadership. Retrieved from <http://leadershipdynamics.org>.
- Price, J.P. (1991). Effective Communication: A Key to Successful Collaboration. *Preventing School Failure*, 35, 25-28.
- Osborn, Michael M. (2004). Why Communication is Important: A Rationale for the Centrality of a Discipline. Retrieved from <http://www.natcom.org>.
- Zust, Christine. (2004). Communicating With Credibility. Retrieved from <http://www.emergingleader.com>.